

James Gordon Bennett's 1831 Report on "The Mormonites"

LEONARD J. ARRINGTON*

In the summer of 1831 James Gordon Bennett demonstrated the enterprise which was to make him one of America's greatest journalists by investigating the circumstances surrounding the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Born in Scotland in 1795, and for several years a student in a Catholic seminary at Aberdeen, young Bennett, "on a sudden impulse," migrated to Nova Scotia in 1819.¹ For a while he was a teacher, but later moved to New York City where he worked for *The Courier*. He first obtained national recognition when he was the Washington, D. C. correspondent for the *New York Enquirer*, sending in lively reports on such topics as the tariff, the United States Bank, and the performances of the French, English, and Italian opera companies. A strong supporter of Andrew Jackson, Bennett eventually secured the backing to purchase the *Enquirer*, and combined it with the *Courier* to publish the *Morning Courier and New York Enquirer*. As associate editor (1829-1832), Bennett developed the *Courier and Enquirer* into a leading eastern newspaper.

During the height of the controversy over the United States Bank, Bennett decided upon a tour of upstate New York. In company with Martin Van Buren, whom he later supported as nominee for Vice President on the Jackson ticket, and Nathaniel S. Benton, Bennett spent two months (from June 12 to August 18, 1831) on an interviewing tour which took him up

*Leonard J. Arrington is professor of economics and history at Utah State University. The author of *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints*, Dr. Arrington has published in *Western Humanities Review*, *Rural Sociology*, *Dialogue*, *BYU Studies*, and a variety of historical journals.

¹Allan Nevins, "James Gordon Bennett," in *Dictionary of American Biography*.

the Hudson to Albany, and westward on the newly-completed Erie Canal to Buffalo. Bennett's personal diary of this trip, now in the Manuscripts Division of the New York Public Library, tells of the visits of himself and companions with political and business leaders in Saratoga, Schenectady, Utica, Syracuse, Auburn, Ithaca, Geneva, Canandaigua, Avon Springs, Rochester, Lockport, Niagara Falls, Buffalo, Batavia, and other towns in western New York. At each stop Bennett records in his reporter's brief-form script, the opinions of local leaders on such topics as internal improvements, local problems and prospects, Masonry and Anti-Masonry, the New York Safety Fund Banking System, and other important topics of the day. He also records his personal observations of town life, newly-built factories, the condition of farms and farmhouses, canals, activity on the lakes, and many scenic attractions. These notes provided the basis for several articles which were subsequently published in the *Courier and Enquirer*.

Of interest to New Yorkers at the time was the emergence of a new religious society, usually called "Mormonites," with a colorful and flamboyant young prophet, Joseph Smith. As ready as any ambitious young journalist to report on the bizarre, Bennett made diary notes from which he wrote one of the earliest feature articles on the new religion.

Three separate entries in Bennett's diary are of interest to Mormon historians. Collectors may be surprised that an entry for June 29, 1831, describing his journey by canalboat from Utica to Syracuse, indicates that on the book table in the canalboat reading room were three newspapers and two books: Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* and the Book of Mormon. The entries for August 7 and 8, 1831, were made at Geneva, a picturesque village situated about sixteen miles southeast of the Joseph Smith farmstead near Palmyra. Internal evidence suggests that Bennett discussed Mormonism with E. B. Grandin, whose firm had printed the Book of Mormon; Charles Butler, the lawyer-philanthropist from whom Martin Harris attempted to borrow money to pay for printing the Book of Mormon; and others.² Here are those entries:

²Butler had been a clerk in the office of Martin Van Buren. As assistant District Attorney of Genessee County in the late 1820's, Butler prosecuted the kidnapers of William Morgan, whose exposure of Freemasonry created a sensation in western New York. Butler later became president of the board of the Union Theological Seminary, a position he held for twenty-seven years.

Geneva, August 7, 1831:

Mormonism. Old Smith [Joseph Smith, Sr.] was a healer—a grand story teller—very glib—was a vender [?]³—made gingerbread and buttermints &c&c—Young Smith [Joseph Smith, Jr.] was careless, idle, indolent fellow—22 years old—brought up to live by his wits—which means a broker of small wants—Harris [Martin] was a hardy industrious farmer of Palmyra—with some money—could speak off the Bible by heart—Henry [Sidney] Rigdon—a parson in general—smart fellow—he is the author of the Bible—they dig first for money—a great many hills—the Golden Bible Hill [Cumorah] where there is a hole 30 or forty feet into the side—6 feet diameter—dug among and the chest fled his approach—turned into a religious plot and gave out the golden plates—the Hill a long narrow hill which spreads out broad to the South—covered with Beech, Maple, Basswood and White Wood—the north end quite naked—the trees cut off in the road from Canandaigua to Palmyra between Manchester & Palmyra—several fine orchards on the east—and fine farms on the west—here the ground is hilly—but small hills—very uneven—the [Lake Canandaigua] outlet runs past part of it—Mormonites went to Ohio because the people here would not pay any attention to them—Smith's wife [Emma] looked into a hole and the chest fled into a trunk and he lost several of them—[William W.] Phelps of the Phoenix was converted to Mormonism and is now a teacher or elder—

August 8, 1831:

Mormonism—C[harles]. Butler saw Harris³ they wanted to borrow money to print the Book—he told him he carried the engravings from the plates to New York—showed them to Professor Anthon who said that he did not know what language they were—told him to carry them to Dr. Mitchell—Doctor Mitchell examined them—and compared them with other hieroglyphics—thought them very curious—and they were the characters of a nation now extinct which he named—Harris returned to Anthon who put some questions to him and got angry with Harris

³Professor Richard L. Anderson of Brigham Young University states that among the Charles Butler Papers in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress is a folder containing correspondence for 1842. One four-page statement dictated by Mr. Butler relates to the Butler-Bennett interview. Butler stated that sometime after Harris' application for a loan, "as he was walking in the street at Geneva he [Butler] was accosted by a young man who shewed him a letter asking if he knew where he cd find the person to whom it was addressed. The letter was to Mr. B [Butler] from Jas Watson Webb then editor of the N Y Inquirer introducing the bearer James Gordon Bennett who was sent to get information about the discovery of the Mormon Bible." See also Francis H. Stoddard, *The Life and Letters of Charles Butler* (New York, 1903), pp. 125-128.

Although the reader will note important inaccuracies, these notes nevertheless demonstrate Bennett's intense interest in the controversial new religion. Certainly, the notes reflect myths about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon which were already in the process of formation in 1831.

While at Canandaigua (located at the head of Lake Canandaigua, ten miles south of the Joseph Smith farm) on August 15, 1831, Bennett used the above notes to write a two-part feature story which appeared in the *Morning Courier and Enquirer* on August 31 and September 1, 1831. Having been written "on the spot," this early report on "Mormonism" as a species of "religious fanaticism" and as a "Church and State Party" suggests not only contemporary attitudes toward "the Mormonites," but also the rapidity with which misinformation was conveyed by the press. The charges of "roguery," of Joseph Smith's "shiftlessness," of Sidney Rigdon's authorship of the Book of Mormon, and of the pretensions of the new faith are all mentioned and deplored. The articles also contain a graphic, and perhaps firsthand, description of the Hill Cumorah as it looked in 1831. The two articles, which were "discovered" by Nancy Richards in a New York library in 1969 and photostated for the use of Professor Richard L. Anderson of Brigham Young University, are here reproduced in their entirety through the generosity of Dr. Anderson.⁴

MORNING COURIER AND ENQUIRER

New York, New York
Wednesday, August 31, 1831

MORMONISM - RELIGIOUS FANATICISM - CHURCH AND STATE PARTY

Canandaigua, Aug. 15th, 1831.

New York has been celebrated for her parties—her sects—her explosions—her curiosities of human character—her fanaticism political and religious. The strangest parties and wildest opinions originate among us. The human mind in our rich vales—on our sunny hills—in our crowded cities or thousand villages—or along the shores of our translucent lakes bursts beyond all ordinary trammels; throws aside with equal fastidiousness the maxims of ages and the discipline of generations, and strikes out new paths for itself. In

⁴Nancy Richards is curator of the museum of the Concord Antiquarian Society, Concord, Massachusetts. An article by Dr. Anderson appears elsewhere in this special issue of *BYU Studies*.

politics—in religion—in all the great concerns of man, New York has a character peculiarly her own; strikingly original, purely American—energetic and wild to the very farthest boundaries of imagination. The centre of the state is quiet comparatively, and grave to a degree; but its two extremities, Eastern and Western; the city of the Atlantic, and the continuous villages of the Lakes, contain all that is curious in human character—daring in conception—wild in invention, and singular in practical good sense as well as in solemn foolery.

You have heard of MORMONISM—who has not? Paragraph has followed paragraph in the newspapers, recounting the movements, detailing their opinions and surprising distant readers with the traits of a singularly new religious sect which had its origin in this state. Mormonism is the latest device of roguery, ingenuity, ignorance and religious excitement combined, and acting on materials prepared by those who ought to know better. It is one of the mental exhalations of Western New York.

The individuals who gave birth to this species of fanaticism are very simple personages, and not known until this thrust them into notice. They are the old and young Joe Smith's Harris a farmer, Ringdon [*sic*] a sort of preacher on general religion from Ohio, together with several other persons equally infatuated, cunning, and hypocritical. The first of these persons, Smith, resided on the borders of Wayne and Ontario counties on the road leading from Canandaigua to Palmyra. Old Joe Smith had been a country pedlar in his younger days, and possessed all the shrewdness, cunning, and small intrigue which are generally and justly attributed to that description of persons. He was a great story teller, full of anecdotes picked up in his peregrinations—and possessed a tongue as smooth as oil and as quick as lightning. He had been quite a speculator in a small way in his younger days, but had been more fortunate in picking up materials for his tongue than stuff for the purse. Of late years he picked up his living somewhere in the town of Manchester by following a branch of the "American System"—the manufacture of gingerbread and such like domestic wares. In this article he was a considerable speculator, having on hand during a fall of price no less than two baskets full, and I believe his son, Joe, Junior, was at times a partner in the concern. What their dividends were I could not learn, but they used considerable molasses, and were against the duty on that article. Young Joe, who afterwards figured so largely in the Mormon religion, was at that period a careless, indolent, idle, and shiftless fellow. He hung round the villages and strolled round the taverns without any end or aim—without any positive defect or as little merit in his

character. He was rather a stout able bodied fellow, and might have made a good living in such a country as this where any one who is willing to work, can soon get on in the world. He was however, the son of a speculative Yankee pedlar, and was brought up to live by his wits. Harris also one of the fathers of Mormonism was a substantial farmer near Palmyra—full of passages of the scriptures—rather wild and flighty in his talk occasionally—but holding a very respectable character in his neighborhood for sobriety, sense and hard working.

A few years ago the Smith's and others who were influenced by their notions, caught an idea that money was hid in several of the hills which give variety to the country between the Canandaigua Lake and Palmyra on the Erie Canal. Old Smith had in his pedling excursions picked up many stories of men getting rich in New England by digging in certain places and stumbling upon chests of money. The fellow excited the imagination of his few auditors, and made them all anxious to lay hold of the bilk axe and the shovel. As yet no fanatical or religious character had been assumed by the Smith's. They exhibited the simple and ordinary desire of getting rich by some short cut if possible. With this view the Smith's and their associates commenced digging, in the numerous hills which diversify the face of the country in the town of Manchester. The sensible country people paid slight attention to them at first. They knew them to be a thriftless set, more addicted to exerting their wits than their industry, readier at inventing stories and tales than attending church or engaging in any industrious trade. On the sides & in the slopes of several of these hills, these excavations are still to be seen. They would occasionally conceal their purposes, and at other times reveal them by such snatches as might excite curiosity. They dug these holes by day, and at night talked and dreamed over the counties' riches they should enjoy, if they could only hit upon an iron chest full of dollars. In excavating the grounds, they began by taking up the green sod in the form of a circle of six feet diameter—then would continue to dig to the depth of ten, twenty, and sometimes thirty feet. At last some person who joined them spoke of a person in Ohio near Painesville, who had a particular felicity in finding out the spots of ground where money is hid and riches obtained. He related long stories how this person had been along shore in the east—how he had much experience in money digging—how he dreamt of the very spots where it could be found. "Can we get that man here?" asked the enthusiastic Smiths. "Why," said the other, "I guess as how we could by going for him." "How far off?" "I guess some two hundred miles—I would go for him myself but I want a little change to bear my expenses." To

work the whole money-digging crew went to get some money to pay the expenses of bringing on a man who could dream out the exact and particular spots where money in iron chests was hid under ground. Old Smith returned to his gingerbread factory—young Smith to his financing faculties, and after some time, by hook or by crook, they contrived to scrape together a little "change" sufficient to fetch on the money dreamer from Ohio.

After the lapse of some weeks the expedition was completed, and the famous Ohio man made his appearance among them. This recruit was the most cunning, intelligent, and odd of the whole. He had been a preacher of almost every religion—a teacher of all sorts of morals.—He was perfectly *au fait* with every species of prejudice, folly or fanaticism, which governs the mass of enthusiasts. In the course of his experience, he had attended all sorts of camp-meetings, prayer meetings, anxious meetings, and revival meetings. He knew every turn of the human mind in relation to these matters. He had a superior knowledge of human nature, considerable talent, great plausibility, and knew how to work the passions as exactly as a Cape Cod sailor knows how to work a whale ship. His name I believe is Henry Rangdon or Ringdon [note how precise Bennett is in his reporting!], or some such word. About the time that this person appeared among them, a splendid excavation was begun in a long narrow hill, between Manchester and Palmyra. This hill has since been called by some, the *Golden Bible Hill*. The road from Canandaigua to Palmyra, runs along its western base. At the northern extremity the hill is quite abrupt and narrow. It runs to the south for a half mile and then spreads out into a piece of broad table land, covered with beautiful orchards and wheat fields. On the east, the Canandaigua outlet runs past it on its way to the beautiful village of Vienna in Phelps. It is profusely covered to the top with Beech, Maple, Bass, and White-wood—the northern extremity is quite bare of trees. In the face of this hill, the money diggers renewed their work with fresh ardour, Ringdon partly uniting with them in their operations.

(To be continued.)

*Continued in the Thursday, September 1, 1831, issue of the MORNING COURIER AND ENQUIRER

MORMON RELIGION - CLERICAL AMBITION - WESTERN
NEW YORK - THE MORMONITES GONE TO OHIO

Concluded from yesterday's paper.

About this time a very considerable religious excitement came over New York in the shape of a revival. It was also about the same period, that a powerful and concerted effort

was made by a class of religionists, to stop the mails on Sunday—to give a sectarian character to Temperance and other societies—to keep up the Pioneer lines of stages and canal boats, and to organize generally a religious party, that would act altogether in every public and private concern of life. The greatest efforts were making by the ambition, tact, skill and influence of certain of the clergy, and other lay persons, to regulate and control the public mind—to check all its natural and buoyant impulses—to repress effectually freedom of opinion—and to turn the tide of public sentiment entirely in favor of blending religious and worldly concerns together. Western New York has for years, had a most powerful and ambitious religious party of zealots, and their dupes. They have endeavored ever since the first settlement of Rochester, to organize a religious hierarchy, which would regulate the pursuits, the pleasures, and the very thoughts of social life. This organization was kept up by banding churches and congregations together—by instituting laws similar to those of excommunication—by a species of *espionage*, as powerful and as terrible as that of a Spanish Inquisition. Every occupation in life—every custom of the people—every feeling and every thought, from the running of a stage or of a lady's tongue up to the legislation of the state, or of Congress, was to be regularly marked and numbered like so many boxes of contraband or lawful merchandise, by these self-created religious censorships and divines. Rochester is, and was the great headquarters of the religious empire. The late Mr. Bissell, one of the most original and talented men in matters of business, was equally so in religious enthusiasm, and all measures calculated to spread it among the people. — The singular character of the people of western New York—their originality, activity, and proneness to excitement furnished admirable materials for enthusiasts in religion or roguery to work upon. Pure religion—the religion of the heart and conduct—the religion that makes men better and wiser—that makes woman more amiable and benevolent—that purifies the soul—that represses ambition—that seeks the private oratory and not the highway to pour forth its aspirations: such a religion was not that of the party of which I speak. Theirs is the religion of the pomp and circumstance of glorious controversy—the artificial religion of tracts, Magdalen Reports, lines of stages—the religion of collecting money from those who should first pay their debts—of sending out missionaries to spend it, and of letting the poor and ignorant at home starve and die. Such mistaken principles and erroneous views must when attempted to be carried into effect, breed strange results. Men's minds in this age will not submit to the control of hypocrisy or superstition or clerical ambition. They may be shackled for a day through

their wives and daughters—for a month—a year, but it cannot be lasting; when the first die or the last get husbands, independence will be asserted.

This general impulse given to religious fanaticism by a set of men in Western New York, has been productive among other strange results of the infatuation of Mormonism. This piece of roguery, folly and frenzy (for it partakes of all) is the genuine fruit of the same seeds which produced the Sunday Mail movement—the Pioneer line of stages—the Magdalen Reports &c. &c. It is religion run into madness by zealots and hypocrites.

It was during this state of public feeling in which the money diggers of Ontario county, by the suggestions of the Ex-Preacher from Ohio, thought of turning their digging concern into a religious plot, and thereby have a better chance of working upon the credulity and ignorance of their [their] associates and the neighborhood. Money and a good living might be got in this way. It was given out that visions had appeared to Joe Smith—that a set of golden plates on which was engraved the "Book of Mormon," enclosed in an iron chest, was deposited somewhere in the hill I have mentioned. People laughed at the first intimation of the story, but the Smiths and Rangdon persisted in its truth. They began also to talk very seriously, to quote scripture, to read the bible, to be contemplative, and to assume that grave studied character, which so easily imposes on ignorant and superstitious people. Hints were given out that young Joe Smith was the chosen one of God to reveal this new mystery to the world; and Joe from being an idle young fellow, lounging about the villages, jumped up into a very grave parsonlike man, who felt he had on his shoulders the salvation of the world, besides a respectable looking sort of a blackcoat. Old Joe, the ex-preacher, and several others, were the believers of the new faith, which they admitted was an improvement in christianity, foretold word for word in the bible. They treated their own invention with the utmost religious respect. By the special interposition of God, the golden plates, on which was engraved the Book of Mormon, and other works, had been buried for ages in the hill by a wandering tribe of the children of Israel, who had found their way to western New York, before the birth of christianity itself. Joe Smith is discovered to be the second Messiah who was to reveal this word to the world and to reform it anew.

In relation to the finding of the plates and the taking the engraving, a number of ridiculous stories are told.—Some unsanctified fellow looked out the other side of the hill. They had to follow it with humility and found it embedded beneath a beautiful grove of maples. Smith's wife, who had a

little of the curiosity of her sex, peeped into the large chest in which he kept the engravings taken from the golden plates, and straightway one half the new Bible vanished, and has not been recovered to this day. Such were the effects of the unbelievers on the sacred treasure. There is no doubt but the ex-parson from Ohio is the author of the book which was recently printed and published in Palmyra, and passes for the new Bible. It is full of strange narratives—in the style of the scriptures, and bearing on its face the marks of some ingenuity, and familiar acquaintance with the Bible. It is probable that Joe Smith is well acquainted with the trick, but Harris the farmer and the recent converts, are true believers.—Harris was the first man who gave credit to the story of Smith and the ex-preacher. He was their maiden convert—the Ali of the Ontario Mahomet, who believed without a reason and without a murmur. They attempted to get the Book printed, but could not raise the means till Harris stept [*sic*] forward, and raised money on his farm for that purpose. Harris with several manuscripts in his pocket, went to the city of New York, and called upon one of the Professors of Columbia College for the purpose of shewing them to him. Harris says that the Professor thought them very curious, but admitted that he could not decypher them. Said he to Harris, "Mr. Harris you had better go to the celebrated Doct. Mitchell and shew them to him. He is very learned in these ancient languages, and I have no doubt will be able to give you some satisfaction." "Where does he live," asked Harris. He was told, and off he posted with the engravings from the Golden Plates to submit to Doc. Mitchell—Harris says that the Doctor received him very "purlitely," looked at his engravings—made a learned dissertation on them—compared them with the hieroglyphics discovered by Champollion in Egypt—and set them down as the language of a people formerly in existence in the East, but now no more.

The object of his going to the city to get the "Book of Mormon" printed, was not however accomplished. He returned with his manuscript or engravings to Palmyra—tried to raise money by mortgage on his farm from the New York Trust Company—did raise the money, but from what source—whether the Trust Company or not I am uncertain. At last a printer in Palmyra undertook to print the manuscript of Joe Smith, Harris becoming responsible for the expense. They were called translators, but in fact and in truth they are believed to be the work of the Ex-Preacher from Ohio, who stood in the background and put forward Joe to father the new bible and the new faith. After the publication of the golden bible, they began to make converts rapidly. The revivals and other religious excitements had thrown up materials for the foundation of a new sect, they soon found they

had not dug for money in vain—they began to preach—to pray—to see more visions—to prophesy and perform the most fantastic tricks—there was now no difficulty in getting a living and the gingerbread factory was abandoned. They created considerable talk over all this section of the country. Another revelation came upon them, and through Joe and some other of these prophets, they were directed to take up their march and go out to the promised land—to a place near Painesville, Ohio. Money was raised in a twinkling from the new converts. Their principles—their tenets—their organization—their discipline were as yet unformed and unfashioned, and probably are so to this day. Since they went to Ohio they have adopted some of the worldly views of the Shakers and have formed a sort of community system where everything is in common. Joe Smith, Harris, the Ex-pedlar and the Ex-parson are among their elders and preachers—so also now is Phelps one of Mr. Granger's leading anti-masonic editors in this village.

Such is a brief view of the rise and progress of the *Mormon Religion* one of the strangest pieces of fanaticism to which the ill-advised and the worst regulated ambition and folly of certain portions of the clergy in Western New York ever gave birth. What a lesson it ought to teach us!

James Gordon Bennett's eagerness to break into print before he had all his facts straight is not untypical of his own career nor of that of the propensities of leading journalists of his age. Considering the state of transportation and communication in antebellum America, newspapers were able to "get away with" ambiguous writing, if not palpable falsehoods. This partly accounts for the pertinacity with which early Americans held on to the false and damaging image of Mormonism conveyed by Bennett and other writers and publishers.

Nevertheless, the resourcefulness displayed by Bennett in reporting so early on the emergence of the new faith suggests why Bennett rose to become one of America's greatest newspaper entrepreneurs. In 1835 he established the *New York Herald*, a four-page daily selling for one cent a copy, which soon achieved a preeminent position among American newspapers. The *Herald's* coverage of the news, wrote Allan Nevins in his article on Bennett in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, was "comprehensive, piquant, and bold." Its "boldness in laughing at churches, politicians, and pompous public characters," Nevins added, was widely applauded. Thus, while Bennett's editorials and articles were sometimes flippant, impudent,

and sensationalistic, they also contributed toward the democratization of the new republic.

Throughout his journalistic career (his death occurred in 1872) Bennett published hundreds of articles on the Mormons, and his reports on Joseph Smith were among the fairest that were printed about that extraordinary personality. Never one to recall past injustices and ever ready to acknowledge present favors, Joseph Smith personally induced the City Council of Nauvoo, Illinois, in December 1841, to pass a resolution expressing "lasting gratitude" and "appreciation" to "that high-minded and honorable editor of the New York Weekly Herald, James Gordon Bennett, Esq. . . . for his very liberal and unprejudiced course towards us as a people, in giving us a fair hearing in his paper, thus enabling us to reach the ears of a portion of the community, who otherwise would ever have remained ignorant of our principles and practices." The Council resolution expressed the hope that the citizens of Nauvoo would subscribe for the *Herald* "and thus be found patronizing true merit, industry, and enterprise."⁵

⁵Joseph Smith, *History of the Church* . . . (2nd ed., 6 vols., Salt Lake City, 1949), Vol. 4, pp. 477-478. But see also the allusions to Bennett in Vol. 5, pp. 275-276.